

Religion and Patriotism
Amos 7:10-17
Acts 5:12-29
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It has only been within the past decade or so that a sermon on Religion and ^{Patriotism} ~~Patriotism~~ has become difficult to preach and potentially controversial. | With some notable exceptions the climate in this nation for years was one ^{of} quiet congeniality between Church and state: | so congenial, in fact, that the sociologists announced that a new kind of religion was born - American Religion - in which love of God and love for country became somewhat synonymous. | To be an atheist was to be un-American, subversive. | To dissent from Government policy, or to be obnoxiously critical of the nation was to be un-Christian. | In a book entitled Politics, Poker and Piety, A Perspective on Cultural Religion in America, Wallace Fisher wrote, ["The Church in America has never faced up to the. . . elemental conflict between prophetic Christianity and pragmatic politics. . . The Church. . . on occasion must be at odds with any state, even the democratic state. | For almost two centuries the majority in America have assumed that their national state upholds God. | Witness the Civil War, in which each side claimed the support of the same God. | Until recently, except for a minority, American churchmen have not faced the possibility of having to chose between God and the state," (p. 19-20)

indented + single space the quote →
there may be a conflict between our loyalty to our country and our religious convictions.
→ Those are difficult words: | But the fact of the matter is that in the past decade a significant number of Christian Americans felt the necessity of choosing. | The two issues which provided the context were Civil Rights and then the War in

In both instances people loudly dissented from national policy and broke the law for reasons of
Indochina. | For reasons of Christian conscience, ~~people broke~~
~~the law~~: other people ^{were enraged} ~~felt alienated from their Churches~~ because
the Church at times seemed to be sympathizing with those who
were ~~breaking the law by~~ engaging in illegal protests or resisting
the draft. | The result was that for a lot of Americans, Religion
and Patriotism, became the focus of very heated debate, recrimi-
nations, charges, suspicion and general discomfort. | People be-
came ^{polemic,} ~~unhappy,~~ defensive. | If you flew the flag in Church someone
was bound to call you a superpatriot, more interested in American
Religion than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. | If you didn't fly
the flag someone was bound to infer that your loyalty was suspect:
an altogether unhappy state of affairs which made not discussing
Religion and Patriotism the prudent position for the clergyman
who valued his job security.

This morning, however, I should like to discuss ^{the topic,} Religion
~~and Patriotism~~, looking forward to a Bicentennial year during
which we will be thinking about our relationship to our nation
with some ^{regularity} ~~constancy~~. | And I should like to begin by relating
three brief vignettes which will define the dimensions of the
~~topic~~ issue.

Vignette number ^{one} 1: | The time is 750 B.C. | Jeroboam
~~Jeroboam~~ II
was King of Israel, reigning in a rare era of peace and prosperity.
But all was not well within Israel. | The rich were exploiting
the poor, | the market place was corrupt, | religion was popular
but ineffective in promoting justice. | And along came a man
by the name of Amos who believed that the ^{well-being} ~~welfare~~ of his beloved
nation depended on things like integrity and justice. | "Let
justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-
flowing stream"] he thundered. | (Amos 5:24). | ^{Now} The people
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that sort of talk. Religion and politics don't mix.
didn't much like ~~what Amos said~~. One of the court chaplains ran to the King saying, "Amos is conspiring against you. . . the country cannot bear what he is saying." And to Amos himself he said, "Be off. . . Off with you^{to} Judah. . . never prophecy at Bethel, for this is the King's sanctuary," (Amos 12-13) -, the Israeli equivalent of the ("America, Love it or Leave it" bumper sticker.)

Vignette number two. | The time is the first Century, the place Jerusalem: | the government Roman. | A man by the name of Simon Peter got himself arrested for teaching something about the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. | The government had ordered him to stop on the grounds that what he was saying was subversive - which, in fact, it most certainly was if Caesar alone is sovereign. When he was arrested a second time he was told, "We expressly ordered you to desist - and what has happened?" You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching." | To which Peter responded with characteristic bluntness, "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5: 28-29)

Amos was exiled. | Peter was flogged for that particular infraction. | But the issues^{are} the same. | To whom does one owe ultimate allegiance? Can a man be a loyal, patriotic citizen of his nation while reserving his ultimate allegiance for God under whose sovereignty even the nation falls and by whose justice even the nation must be judged?

Vignette number three. | The time is the eighteenth century. The place, Great Britain's thirteen colonies in the new world. Many of the people who had come to the colonies were Englishmen,

Puritains -
Scots, Irish. Many of them were Calvinists - Presbyterians. Part of the reason they were here was that they had been persecuted for their religious convictions and practices. ~~under totalitarianism.~~ Some of them, by no means all, had a vision of a new society in which men would be free to express their religious convictions as they saw fit. They didn't like totalitarianism: they didn't like taxation without representation: some of them, out of their Calvinistic theology, were beginning to believe that individual people had God-given rights. Some of them were moving in the direction of treason, insurrection, revolution.

George Duffield, pastor of Third Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, was such an ardent revolutionary that the British ^{placed} a price on his head. One man who was a regular member of his congregation wrote to his wife in 1775, "I have been this morning to hear Mr. Duffield. . . the clergy are just now beginning to engage in politics, and they engage with such a fervor that will produce wonderful results." The man was John Adams, writing to his wife Abigail (Presbyterians and the American Revolution p 382-3)

In Hopewell, New Jersey, on April 23, 1775, after hearing word of Lexington and Concord, the minister said ^{from the pulpit,} "The red Coats are murdering our New England brothers. Who follows me to Boston?" According to ^{the} ~~one~~ record, every man answered. (Historic Marker, Old Hopewell Church (Baptist))

In Trenton, the minister of the First Presbyterian Church raised a regiment of 100 from among his congregation and led them into battle. That church was held in such contempt by

the British that they used it later as a stable. | An interesting, if irreverent, anecdote is that after the Battle of Trenton the congregation allowed the bodies of Hessian mercenaries to be buried in the church yard ^{after long debate and a close vote,} in a far, unmarked corner.

One of those Hessians wrote in a letter, "Call this war, dearest friend, by whatsoever name you may, only call it not an American Revolution. | It is nothing more nor less than an Irish-Scotch, Presbyterian rebellion." (ob.cite. p 303)

And in 1776, a Dr. Ingles, Anglican Rector of Trinity Church, New York, wrote in his diary, "I do not know one Presbyterian minister, nor have I been able, after strict inquiry, to hear of any who did not by preaching and every effort in their power promote all the measures of the Continental Congress, however extravagant." (see A Brief History of the Presbyterians, T. A. Toetscher)

Can a person love God and Country? | Can he be religious and patriotic? | Our Presbyterian forefathers answered that affirmatively. | But the subtlety of their position - which we ^{is that they were Englishmen,} must never forget - ~~is that~~ the legal authority, the government, was British. | Before one became an American Patriot one had to decide to be subversive. | And we should never fail to appreciate the pain that decision must have cost them. | They were called traitors.

Religion and Patriotism? | It all depends on how you define Patriotism. | What those early Presbyterians had to decide on the way to becoming revolutionaries is that there is an authority higher than the state: | in Peter's formula, "We must obey God rather than men." | And it is the beauty and uniqueness of our

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nation that this sentiment - so new - so radical - was built right into the system of government produced after the revolution. The Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the continuing process by which the courts of the land define and redefine the sacred rights of individuals.

History had taught the founders of the Republic that governments inevitably infringe on what they judged to be "unalienable rights"; that political systems invariably usurp individual rights rather than protect them.

Their Calvinist theology taught them that while men were created to be free, they are also hopelessly self centered and hungry for power. Writing in A. D. Magazine last year Michael Novak put it succinctly, "The secret wisdom of our founders in 1789 was that they did not trust the goodness of the American people, their elected representatives, the courts, the press, or the President. They didn't trust anybody. American Democracy is built on the premise that human beings are too corrupt to trust." (A.D. June 1974)

Thus, the system they created included checks and balances to assure that power is evenly distributed and never available to be used oppressively against the people.

Their Presbyterian heritage had produced, one hundred years before at the Westminster Assembly, the radical idea that a person's conscience was sacred, and that no earthly authority has the right to dictate the content of a person's conscience. And so religion is not even mentioned in the Constitution: and

negatively, in the form of
~~in the form of~~
when it appears in the first amendment it is ~~as~~ a restriction
on the power of the state to establish religion of any kind,
or to prevent its free exercise.

called the United States of America
What all of that means is that in the new radical experiment ^①
men would be free to be religions ^{ous} or not religions ^{ious} when and how
and to the degree they chose. | Although it took two hundred years
for the idea to include Black Americans, ~~B~~ means that individual
people are to be respected, and that they have God-given rights
of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness however they chose
to define that. | In terms of common life it means that men are
free to disagree with their government, free to live here and
enjoy the rights and privileges of citizenship even if they don't
love the nation: | free to oppose the constitutional ^{constituted} authorities
in orderly ways so long as they do not advocate the violent
overthrow of the system.

Some of the ideas behind the revolution were universally
accepted: | others were advocated by a liberal minority. | Some
wanted another monarchy: | others were so afraid of centralized
government that they advocated a loose confederation of sovereign
states. | But in it all the idea was being born that the individual
deserves to be free, that conscience is a sacred and that liberty
is so precious that governments ought always to protect it, par-
ticularly when liberty is used in ways that are offensive to the
majority.

History teaches the rightness of that idea. | On the editorial
page of last Sunday's New York Times James Reston documented the
fragile state of democracy in the world today. | And on the same

(*) Josiah Quincy - at the time of the Revolution observed: "It is much easier to restrain liberty from running into licentiousness than power from swelling into tyranny and oppression." [I Pledge Allegiance Paul Minear, P. 46]

page Tom Wicker lamented the all too familiar abridgement of liberty in India, in the name of national security. (*)

History teaches that patriotism is at once one of man's noblest and also most destructive emotions. When Patriotism becomes a corporate extension of egotism - what we Presbyterians know as original sin - it quickly becomes very dangerous. Fascism is often the result. The Nazis were masters at it. They fanned the flames of nationalism until people believed that they were invincible and had the right to invade and conquer and exploit. And it emerges in our nation when the super-patriot suggests that we should conduct our international affairs on the basis of national pride. That's not patriotism. That is quite simply a corporate amplification of original sin.

Religion and Patriotism? Can a person who has given his allegiance to Jesus Christ be a patriotic citizen? My answer is affirmative: wholeheartedly affirmative. I believe we not only can, but should, love our nation in three precise ways.

I think we can love our country in gratitude and appreciation. I don't think we have to be apologetic or defensive about it. I think we ought to be grateful for the standard of living our system has made possible. I think we ought to be grateful that we slept last night without fear: that we can buy two newspapers this morning, one of which is wildly enthusiastic about the Republican Party and the other of which is totally committed to the Democratic Party. I think we ought to give thanks that we will vote in November and that our vote will count. I think we ought to be grateful for the incredible beauty and resources of this land, for its pluralistic population, its ingenuity. McGeorge Bundy said it well in a commencement address at the

University of Texas: ["We cannot deny our failures . . . nor is such denial in our national tradition. | We cannot deny - indeed we must strongly affirm - our limitations. | But we are the same people that in a generation have twice helped save the freedom of Europe, that have been first among the nations in the struggle to ward off worldwide nuclear catastrophe, | that have shown ourselves ready to respond, time after time, to leadership that appeals to our practical generosity." (New York Times 6/29/75) Patriotism begins in gratitude.

Second, Patriotism demands that people who love their country be critical of it when it falls short of its ideals. Plato said, ["A life without criticism is not worth living."] So it is with our nation. | To love it honestly is to acknowledge its imperfections and failures. | To love it honestly is to take its agony seriously. | In fact, to dissent and to disagree is to put into practice the highest ideal any government ever ventured. | That is why, several years ago, the press and the churches, were so adamant about the effort to equate dissent with disloyalty. | Patriotism, at least of the American variety, submits its government to the most searching of criticism, publicly, openly and without fear. | ^{when} ~~where~~ the early Christians said, ["Jesus Christ is Lord"] they were tacitly dissenting from the imperial sovereignty of Rome. | Our system invites that and Patriotism demands a new determination, in every generation, never to sacrifice it.

Finally, Patriotism demands involvement for reasons that are more than selfish: | reasons that are ^{ethical, moral,} religious. | For the welfare of people, our brothers and sisters, is determined not

often in the sanctuaries of church but in halls and councils of government.

The apocryphal story is told of Benjamin Franklin on the day the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia finally ad-journed. Franklin was old and sick. He was carried through the large crowd waiting outside. A woman asked, "Dr. Franklin, is it finished?" "it is," he said. "But Dr. Franklin, will it work?" "That madam", he answered, "is entirely up to you."

That's where it lies. It is up to us. We have come this far because people have become involved, have cared, and have welcomed the responsibility of public service, public office, public participation. Nothing is more destructive of our system than blase' cynicism about the political process; or that ^{irresponsible} dis-missal of politics as dirty business and politicians as oppor-tunists.

In Trenton, where I visited recently, there is a monument to the important battle in which Washington surprised the Hessians after his daring Delaware River Crossing. ^{The site of the battle where blood was shed for freedom - the site of the monument is here} The monument is in the middle of a grimy, crowded, crime ridden, slum. There - ^{dramatic} in relief - for people with the courage to see - is the dilemma. As I looked at it I could not help but recall words of T. S. Eliot I had read and never forgotten, "This is not what I meant at all. This is not it at all." Back in my study I looked ^{that quote} it up and found it in a speech of the late Robert F. Kennedy. He said, "If we fail to dare, if we do not try, the next generation will harvest the fruit of our apathy - a world we did not want - a world we did not chose - but a world we could have made better, by caring for the results of our labors. And we shall be left with the

hollow apology of T. S. Eliot, 'This is not what I meant. This is not it at all.' I know that you do not mean to leave this kind of world to your children. But if you do not care, who will?"

So, we ^{begin} ~~began last week~~ a year of celebration; a year in which we will ^{venerate} ~~revere~~ ^{of our republic} the past and, hopefully, contemplate the future.[†] Let us move into that year with the noblest patriotism, acknowledging that our ultimate allegiance is to Jesus Christ, and that the freedom to give that allegiance to him is what it means to be an American. Let us move into the Bicentennial year with an honest love for our country: love that is grateful, love that wants the nation to be more than it is, love that sees the vision - the dream - and is willing to care and risk and be involved. ^{and work} ^{Amen} so that what we have and are will be passed to our children and their children.
Amen

O God, you are the creator and father of all men. You alone are the sovereign Lord of all nations. Bless, not with favoritism, but with equal and just mercies, our land. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.